

REACHING THE TOP? ALL PATHS ARE TRUE ON THE RIGHT MOUNTAIN



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*Dedicated to
All who seek their path
To understanding themselves and life*

The Misty Mountain

The mountain stands in the centre of a large city. Not just a hill but a soaring outcrop. Rather like the magnificent mountain of Montserrat Monastery near Barcelona – but surrounded by a city. And the city is big, populous, bustling, with all the accoutrements of a dynamic hub including the finer quality mists of rich-country pollution and the incessant buzz and visual stimulation that has become synonymous with progress. To its inhabitants, the mountain is a symbol of the city, signifying its culture although any deeper association with the mountain has long since been forgotten. In fact, when honest with themselves, most see the mountain as a nuisance as it means that it takes longer to circumnavigate their city and precludes any neat grid of streets. That was how Lazuli, one of its young men saw it in his boring and overworked lifestyle, especially after the pain of his friend's death.

Lazuli was a difficult young man to describe. Difficult because he was so ordinary, so much part of what everyone aspired to for their sons – he had graduated college, he worked for local government, he was not engaged in any excessive activities, watched television, read popular books and voted in elections. He rented a modest apartment near his work and shopped at the local supermarket where he was polite to all the staff. He visited his aging mother once a week, went out with a nice girl and even occasionally attended a well-meaning church that supported the poor in Africa. And within his world, he was ambitious for

promotion and advancement, for this was encouraged by society – always striving for and reaching the top. In these ways he was everyman. But he did have a few personal habits that set him a little apart from his peers. One was that he collected tales and quotes from persons of note that somehow appealed to him. And as he was not really intellectual or religious, these jottings that he carried in his pocket notebook most of the time were a sort of anchor to a wider world that he imagined existed somewhere.

But the world in which Lazuli really lived was that of thousands of cities around the world. A lifestyle dominated by competitive work to earn money to pay off the house, to upgrade the car, to pay for children's education and to pay for health care. A life of rushing from one necessary function to another, with relief also being rushed as holidays to consumed destinations – 'we *did* Italy last summer'. Even creative arts became a consumed item, one that was a *divertissement* from everyday life. Some said it was hard to see what the real life was, for it was invisible – always being strived for but never really being achieved – but they didn't mean it. Some made it to the top of their professional and business mountains, but likewise failed to find everything there. There were a few who preferred a quieter life, and they were derided as time-wasters and lazy. They did not have real jobs like Lazuli, who was now a Grade 5 administrator for supply in the local government of Rugh Epit in Sofist city.

Though the city of Sofist RE was no different from any other city – its name impressed many of its residents, who liked to

refer to themselves as ‘Sofisticats’ with implications of their cool worldly sophistication. In fact, they much preferred it to their State’s strange name, Rugh Epit (RE), which was said to have been the name that the now extinct native culture once gave to the mountain. But today Sofist RE was just another city and as such represented the system to which nearly everyone in the whole world aspired. The poor of other countries were televised tantalizing images of this culture and so this vision spread virtually to all corners of the globe.

Of course, there were different cultures in other parts of the world, but they were all moving toward the same measurable objectives. The technological superiority of the age defined progress, success and happiness. And when something that was accorded value was not material, a commodity approximating that value arose as if given from on high. So it was that in some cultures the most sought after material was simply money to buy goods, while in others it was leisure, which was easily commoditized into packages of travel and *must see* sites – a subtle and curious shift from the quiet and reflective pursuit that once defined leisure for those unburdened by drudgery. The religious had long had their rewards commoditized in such forms as personal health and wealth, or psychological insulation from conscious thought. Even those strange birds who sought a spiritual life found they had to remain ever diligent if they were to avoid the incipient extension of this materialism, for subscriptions to gurus had commoditized personal searches as effectively as the Middle Ages Church’s selling of indulgences.

Lazuli had tried some of these guru courses in the past and found them to be at best warm-feeling clubs and at worst cultish. Nevertheless, he had recently taken up with one of these groups that was unreligious and which he found expressed empathy and support. He needed this as his closest childhood friend, apparently without warning, had committed suicide. It was a great shock to Lazuli who believed the rhetoric that their part of the world was the best possible and was loaded with opportunities and comforts for all. It was in that period of shock that he met others who had been through their own destabilizing experiences – their own suffering. After a few months, with the event largely buried inside him, Lazuli drifted away from the group although he continued to see a dozen or more of the those he met there. They met on a semi-regular basis, in the bars and cafés that filled Sofist RE.

So the city of Sofist in which Lazuli lived and breathed and made his living was like any other. Except that it had a huge and forgotten mountain at its centre. So forgotten was the mountain that over time buildings backed onto it, virtually sealing it off from the city. The front of these buildings all faced a circular road known officially as the 'Inner Ring Road', although it was sometimes referred to by old-timers as 'around the gates'.

Around the Gates

Like all the city's folk, Lazuli rushed 'around the gates', focused on daily life just like most folk everywhere. Buying good wine for dinner, having the car serviced, paying the bills, visiting relatives and friends. He knew that he and his kind were good people by any standards, they paid their taxes, donated to the poor – especially to those affected by natural disasters as it was clearly not their fault that nature had turned on them. But there were also a few people, a remnant of a forgotten group from the past, who felt that the 'Inner Ring Road' was somehow special.

This marginalized group maintained strange ideas about the mountain being sacred, being the soul of the city, some even saw it as signifying an eternal hope – but their belief did not tell them why or how. It was as if they were clinging to an ancient creed, the knowledge of which had long been lost. These people were tolerated as they caused no real harm, although it would have been, as was often expressed, "better for all concerned if they would only work and dress like the rest of us". Not that the society condoned intolerance, for tolerance was a valued expression of the superiority of the society that had grown up in the city – a superiority justified by the obvious fact that others around the world behaved more and more in the same manner. If they didn't, this powerful culture knew that it must occasionally use force to introduce its culture of tolerance.

But contrary to expectations, as Lazuli grew more affluent over time, he had become less content, and even less tolerant. The more he had of all the commodities that he sought, the more he seemed to want something else, and the less he seemed to be satisfied. It was as if he craved for something that had not yet been commoditized, although several businesses had quickly become wealthy by offering chemical means of diverting or quelling the mind to such angst. But that too failed to work in the long term. These drugs shared the drawbacks that they either were needed in ever higher doses or they removed vitality from life – in any case they interfered with family relationships, social acceptability and physical health, and were therefore not officially tolerated. And hence not used by a conservative like Lazuli.

By any popular definition, Lazuli lived in a functioning society that just happened to be built around an all but invisible mountain. As incipient discontent was common to all, it was concluded that “life was not meant to be easy”, that “into every life a little rain must fall”, and even that “bad things sometimes happen to good people”. In his culture, the vestiges of religion enshrined such sentiments, and so Lazuli accepted that this was “the way the things are”.

But there came a day within this society that some people began to question life’s purpose. And among their number was Lazuli and some he had met when struggling with the emotions surrounding his friends suicide. It was a casual group without deep relationships and their common experience of some severe suffering was seldom raised these

days. Rather they talked philosophy, politics and entertainment.

But this day, as they philosophized about the purpose of life, their gaze shifted from the ever-widening concentric highways around the Inner Ring Road to the mountain. It was then that one of their number, named Lapis, asked, “why do you suppose our local name for the Inner Ring Road is ‘around the gates’?”



Through the Gate

So it was that a small group of inquirers became interested in the forgotten mountain. There were probably sixteen to eighteen in the group at that time, including Lazuli. And their deliberations led them to action. They decided to do two things. First, they resolved to ask around about the mountain, and second to find an access route to it.

It was not hard to find a narrow way between tall buildings that led to the edge of the steep mountain. Nor was it difficult to find stories about it – conflicting stories, but stories that made them even more curious about its past significance. Older people particularly, recalled the importance of the mountain and many admitted that the older they became, the more they found themselves unconsciously turning towards it, even though it was almost obscured by the city haze and tall buildings. Some even mentioned the sacredness of the mountain and a few were open enough to share short homilies which they recalled their parents repeating in their old age. There was certainly something special about the mountain, even if it was ignored in daily life.

The problem was that almost no-one they met in the Sivist city had climbed the mountain which really reduced the credibility of any of the informants' beliefs about it. But opinion was valued as much as experience and so all comments became information. There was also the matter that the one or two who were said to have climbed the

mountain were less expansive than those who repeated hearsay. Then there was the problem of the books. To his surprise, Lazuli found that the mountain dominated their local literature, but such books were seldom borrowed from libraries or stocked in commercial bookshops, perhaps because their ecstasy also seemed to be associated with self-induced suffering. He even found one small bookseller who specialized in 'Mountain Books'. Here the group found much that was unintelligible to them but nevertheless enticing, and which offered a vague feeling of refreshment.

Discussing these discoveries, the group decided that they must approach the mountain. It was Saturday and they had little else to do. The narrow way that they took to its side was apparently one of many similar paths, all accessible, all hardly used, all virtually forgotten. And at the base of the mountain they saw a wrought iron gate and arch which contained the word, 'Liberty'. They were charmed, as liberty was a virtue they prized, that their society espoused – especially at the level of the individual. Surely, they reasoned, this represented a critical component of their collective past. There was nothing to fear from liberty. Thus they easily dismissed the rumors they had heard about persons who climbed the mountain never being the same again. Of course this was nonsense, for they had met one or two who had done so and they seemed fine if a little dispassionate and quieter than their neighbors.

Passing through Liberty gate, they wondered about the names of the other gates that some of the elders had said were distributed around the circumference of the mountain's

base. Perhaps they too proclaimed the virtues of their advanced society in such forms as 'democracy', 'progress', 'equality', 'competition' or even that highest virtue of the day 'security'. But their speculation was soon hushed when they entered into a porch-like area just inside the gate. In fact, it was more like a large foyer with multiple doors, each labeled with what seemed to the inquirers as familiar although unnaturally grouped names.

The doors were the only means of continuing to the mountain. Which one to take? A discussion ensued, then a debate, which ultimately died down when they generally acknowledged that none of them knew enough about the names on the doors or where they led to attach such strong views to them. And they all felt lighter with that realization. What to do?

"Let's approach this as rationally as we can", said Lapis, who was usually the quietest and most pensive of the group.

"We have seventeen doors labeled 'Art', 'Asceticism', 'Deeds', 'Faith', 'Friendship', 'Grief', 'Jesu', 'Marx', 'Muni', 'Natural understanding', 'Philosophy', 'Prayer', 'Reflection', 'Science', 'Sufi', 'Trauma' and 'Work'. We don't know how they differ; but by coincidence there are seventeen of us here today. We can each take one door if we dare."

The proposal seemed reasonable, and as it was a long summer day with much daylight remaining, they decided to enter their respective doors – chosen without much discussion, as if each door suited a particular person. It all

seemed quite natural. They agreed to reassemble at dusk back at Liberty gate.

So after wrestling with the rusted hinges each passed through his doorway. And on the other side they found nothing very special. They simply saw each other – but then they raised their eyes and saw the immensity of the mountain looming over them and they felt strangely humbled. Lowering their eyes they each noticed faint paths leading from their door. After some hesitation, it was again Lapis who spoke for them when said, “the way is clear”. And they each set off on their path.

At first, they remained in sight of each other, but gradually, the form of the mountain required the paths to twist and turn, to zigzag and crisscross such that the wayfarers were isolated at times and at others unexpectedly brought back in sight of each other. But each path was clear to its wayfarer. Eventually they were obscured from each other. They continued like this through the afternoon and into early evening, absorbed in the discoveries of their respective ways, enjoying rare feelings of calmness.

As the sun set, they reversed their steps and quickly returned to the gate. They realized how they had taken their time on the uphill walk, as if they were naturally regulated by the environment rather than simply exploring a forgotten mountain. There was certainly something special about the tiny parts of the mountain they had experienced, and they all thought about returning the next day.

By dusk and within an hour of each other, they had all assembled back at Liberty gate – all that is expect Lapis. He just failed to appear. They waited for another hour and some became restless wanting to get home. Three of their number agreed to wait while the rest returned to the city. When he had not appeared after yet another hour, the three became more concerned – concerned for Lapis yes, but in the case of two of them also concerned that they should have been with their families by now. Eventually, as twilight faded into full moonlight, one of the three, the reliable Lazuli, volunteered to walk in and look for Lapis while the others went home. But before taking each others' leave, they agreed to contact their colleagues to have everyone come back the next day for more exploration of the mountain.

Lazuli set off following the path that Lapis had taken from the Muni door. It was a gentle path that rose and fell comfortably and squeezed between giant granite outcrops of the great mountain. Occasionally he was interrupted by a rainforest vine whose thorns required him to 'wait-a-while', to reverse a little to release the hooks and then proceed anew – a sort of natural speed control. Calling as he walked, he eventually came across Lapis resting under a natural rock veranda where he had apparently made a makeshift mattress of herbs.

"Surely you're not intending to stay the night!" exclaimed Lazuli on spying this arrangement.

And he heard Lapis' soft reply, "I might never return". It was a statement of fact that did not warrant the disrespect of reply.

And so after sitting in silence with Lapis for some time, Lazuli retraced the Muni path to its door, passed through Liberty gate and went home to bed. But all the way back, he was possessed of a powerful feeling. He was not worried for his friend's safety for he somehow knew that nothing but good would happen to him. He worried for himself. He felt ... , yes that was it, he felt alienated. As he descended from the small rocky niche where Lapis was now sleeping, Lazuli had the feeling that he was turning away from himself, that he had left something of himself on the mountain. "Strange", he thought, "how the mind works".

Lazuli pondered his reaction and the experiences of the day as he tossed in his bed, giving up on sleep for a while to read from his little notebook of sayings that he seldom understood but felt were somehow special – until he eventually slept and dreamt of again going through Liberty gate. It was a dream of suffering and angst overlaid with a promise of release – but on waking he dismissed it as his old insecurities mixing with the days events, as his dreams often were.

Broadway

First thing the next day, Lazuli phoned to his colleagues and arranged for them to again meet at Liberty gate. By the appointed hour, ten of them had joined him. They awaited the others but no more arrived. Then Lazuli related how he had left Lapis on his path last night. They were surprised but unconcerned.

“Its his business”, some replied, but they all agreed to reenter the mountain for more adventure.

Each of the ten passed through the same door that they had yesterday as if it was destined – for it seemed that their choices bore some consistency with their lives. The lad of Indonesian parents reentered the *Sufi* door, the most socially concerned of the young men the *Marx* door, one from a pious family chose *Faith* ... and so on. All of them that is, except Lazuli, who rather than entering his first chosen door, passed through the Muni door to seek out Lapis.

Again they agreed to meet at dusk at Liberty gate. With their earlier start, they had more time than yesterday. Setting off with buoyant and expectant hearts, they were each determined to climb to the top of the mountain by following their chosen path, though none was to get nearly that far.

Lazuli soon came across the rock veranda where he had left Lapis the previous night. The verdant bed was empty and

footprints in the moist morning soil showed that Lapis had already set off further along his path.

“What had he to eat, to drink, and what about other comforts” Lazuli asked himself aloud – but upon asking himself, he again felt the reassurance that all was as it should be. So he set off after Lapis.

As he walked, he noticed the path steepened markedly. It was not difficult, but it meant his pace was slower and he tired more quickly. The air also was becoming thinner. Not noticeable lower in oxygen for he had not gained any significant altitude, but physically thinner, and fresher. “I am rising above the pollution of the city”, he thought and turned to look back and down through a gap between the trees. The hazy city looked as he expected it might, but with a certain artificiality in contrast to the nature that now surrounded him. He continued on up the Muni path.

After quite some time, he came across Lapis, beaming with contentment.

“I have never been so alive”, he exclaimed in welcome to Lazuli. And they embraced, which was quite out of character for theirs was a culture where emotions were kept under tight rein in the interests of social sobriety and stability. Unembarrassed at their spontaneous embrace, the two continued to walk up the path. Or rather they climbed, for now the path led them over igneous outcrops, down steep valleys and up the opposite side until they eventually

arrived at a small flat meadow of fescue, marguerites and poppies.

As they allowed themselves to gently sprawl on the fresh herbs under a friendly sun, warm yet not hot, they each kept their own thoughts. An hour passed, then another, then another until Lazuli eventually said,

"I suppose its time to head back if we want to be there by dusk, which is what I agreed with the others as we did yesterday."

But Lapis said nothing – he just smiled contentedly to himself. Below them from this vantage point, they could see the tiny ant-like figures of Sofist's inhabitants running about their affairs as usual. It was Sunday so everyone was out promenading or visiting friends.

Eventually, Lazuli half-asked half-stated to Lapis, "you are coming back?" And Lapis' reply was that of enraptured angel; "I feel I need never return to that world".

"But you must, it was OK to spend last night out here, it was the weekend – but tomorrow is a work day and we must all resume our routine lives", replied a surprised Lazuli.

And even as the words left his lips he knew they would be fruitless, for they sounded dry, devoid of the joy that had so moved him in Lapis' voice. He was torn – could he too stay and commune further with this mountain on which he felt more at ease than he could ever remember, or should he

conform to all that his life has conditioned him to do? Of course it was the latter, but the thought intrigued him that his friend Lapis could elect so easily to follow a different path.

It intrigued him all the way back down to Liberty gate where most of the other friends had already regrouped. Most, as some had returned earlier having become bored with the quietness of solitary walking and the rising slope of their paths. Lazuli told them of Lapis' decision to again remain on the mountain.

"But what will he eat, where will he sleep? What if something happens?" they clucked and Lazuli was surprised to find himself calming their anxiety with a inner quietude that he had never before known.

"He has all that he needs", he simply said, and the way he said it convinced the others and himself.

The next day, Monday, was different. The colleagues met in the evening and discussed the mountain and Lapis. Lazuli even thought of making a quick trip in the twilight, but was talked out of it by the others who urged common sense.

"You have to rise early for work tomorrow, and besides the mountain will always be there. Anyway Lapis may well be home in bed by now regretting the folly of missing a day's work." Lazuli was persuaded not to enter the mountain, but he did promise himself to call past Lapis' home the next morning to check if he had indeed returned.

Tuesday morning Lapis was not home. Nor was he there in the succeeding days. Lazuli grew a little anxious and tried to reclaim the calmness of spirit he felt on the mountain. But his spirit was not calm amidst the noise and distractions of the city and his life. So by Friday, he determined that he would set off in search of his friend – he would take an unprecedented day off work, unprecedented because he like all others never took a day off. That is, except for the long summer vacation when he could ‘do’ some exotic destination and on returning, boast of his suntan, his exploits and his collection of objects from strange cultures the names of which had usually forgotten even before he arrived home.

So he went again to the mountain. And this day proved to be fruitful in so many ways for he realized that a yearning that he felt deep inside subsided somewhat when he approached the mountain. It was the same feeling he recalled as when he sat in a quiet nature park or witnessed an act of kindness.

Setting off at dawn, he was determined to walk quickly to the meadow where he had last seen Lapis. But after passing through Liberty gate and the Muni door, he found his pace naturally slowed and his senses became more balanced. The dulling effect of the city’s roar and its gaudy signs to which his mind had become adapted lifted. He found he was sensitized to tiny details – and he noticed new patterns in nature. Fern trees sprayed their leaves like decorative fireworks or like a color die entering a calm lake, leaf veins revealed the same patterns as blood vessels in lungs, injured limbs of trees reinforced themselves like broken bones. And

he grew ever calmer, just as had happened on his previous two missions to the mountain.

Resting at the rock veranda where Lapis had spent his first night, Lazuli felt a connection with Lapis that was more than worldly friendship. "It was more akin to kinship, to sharing the same blood, the same *sang-ha*!" he thought, "as if we are interrelated". With this comforting feeling, Lazuli set off again up the steep path until he respectfully entered the open space of the little meadow, on which Lapis sat erect with his eyes closed and his hands folded together in his lap.

He regarded the calmness of the picture – Lapis, yogi-like in his position, with a smile of contentment and absorption. After some time, perhaps it was ten minutes as Lazuli later related to his colleagues in the city, Lapis opened his eyes and was totally unsurprised to see Lazuli regarding him from the edge of the meadow.

As was now usual, Lazuli broke the silence. "So you have been here since I left you last Sunday? Have you eaten?"

Lapis replied in his even confident voice. "I have eaten of the berries and beans growing along the ways; I have ventured further on my path, and have just returned here to contemplate and strengthen my understanding of what is happening to me. It seems somehow that my suffering of the recent past opened me to the path that has led me here – and I must follow it further."

“Whatever could this mean?” Lazuli asked himself, confused yet certain that Lapis was better off than he had ever seen him.

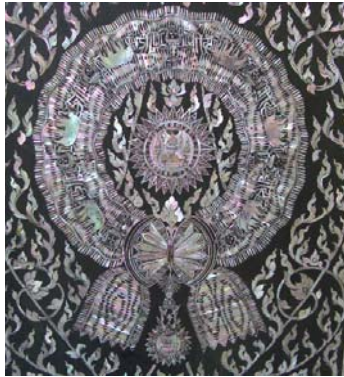
Part of the answer soon came from Lapis himself. “I see the others have found the world outside the mountain more attractive than this idyll. I am pleased for you, that you find something here, for I see it in your eyes. It is as if our minds are clouded by the pollution of our city dwelling and our eyes are distracted from the mountain by the city’s walls and bright lights, and our ears are stopped by the noise of ceaseless chatter. I have learned much in my few days here and know I will understand more as I continue to look in this inner direction.”

He said little else, except to explain that this level meadow was a stopping point on his way, and one to which he might return from time to time. But there were other similar points further along the way.

“It is the true way, it may not be the only way, but it is true for me”, Lapis said, “further along the way I also think I saw another person on a different way.”

Lazuli ventured that it was a shame that their colleagues felt bound to the city, to which Lapis replied, “It is as it must be, their doors are ever able to be opened, but I know they found even their short experiences on their paths hard.”

And he added words that sounded like a prophet's, "for the way to understanding is narrow and steep, but the easy path of ignorance is the Broadway."



Causal Camp

It was time for Lazuli to return again for it was approaching dusk and the upper path was difficult in such light. He considered staying on the mountain with Lapis – he considered it seriously – wrestling inside himself, but eventually opted to return and tell the others of the beauty of his experiences, of the rapture evident of Lapis’ face and of the need for them all to continue to learn about the mountain. And as he descended from the flat meadow where Lapis would spend his night, he recalled his thoughts of that first day, “strange how the mind works”.

“Strange. Yes,” he said to himself, “it is strange, but only when we judge it by our everyday thought processes, which is more brain than mind!”

This insight stayed with him all the way to Liberty gate, at which point, the city’s defined boundary forced a recollection of something related to his musings. And then it came to him. There may well be something about the mind among the dusty books of the bookseller, Mountain Books. He resolved to pass by the shop on his way home, unconscious that it was well beyond the time that shops closed.

In fact it was after 10pm. But the Mountain Books shop was still partly lit. Lazuli could vaguely hear music through the door – was it from Vienna? So he knocked tentatively at the door, and was surprised by a genial “come in”. He did, and a

waltz of books wobbled before his eyes as he rapidly sought a chair, for he felt faint.

The bookseller brought him a glass of water but otherwise let him be for a few minutes, and then said, "don't be alarmed, I have seen it before – someone comes from the mountain to the shop and they are overwhelmed by the feeling that many have trodden the path before them. Those who come back to me say it is like a feeling of companionship when one is desperately lonely, though at the time they could not put their feeling into words. Anyway, what book is you are seeking?"

Lazuli was sure he had no specific book in mind. But he was greatly comforted by the words of the bookseller, and without thinking, replied, "it is a book about the way of the 'muni'."

Silent again, the bookseller glanced around and his eyes settled on a shelf of books that had obviously been untouched for a long time – and in the dust his finger traced a line like an arrow towards one – 'The Way of the Muni'. Lapis was jolted by the congruence of his description of the book and its title, for he had never heard of the book or the subject before. He tendered some change, which was gently declined, and silently left the shop to walk the remaining short distance to his home, where he immediately lay down and slept deeply as if recovering from a major shock.

A hazy sun rose over the city. It was late morning in the area where Lazuli and his comrades lived on the western side of

the city as it was sheltered by the mountain. Lazuli awoke elated. He could not think why. In fact he could list reasons why he might be more worried than elated – he had really wanted to stay on the mountain with Lapis; he had been exhausted last night; he was confused over his own actions and the coincidence of the book's title, and he had broken the social convention of taking a Friday off work without making a long hedonistic weekend of it. And now it was Saturday morning.

As he lay there fully awake, his hand reached out to the book he had been given. Given. That was another question he asked himself, "why was it given free? How can the bookseller run a shop on that basis, especially when he seems to have no other customers?" But somehow he felt that all would become clear in time, and he opened the book.

The very first section in the book took his attention for the next hours. He couldn't quite grasp the whole concept, but it felt right and its general sense spoke to him at a deeper level than he had ever experienced. It was getting on for noon when he realized that he had reread one poetic passage several times. Not in the manner of lost concentration, but as if it was a mantra that awakened something within him. And it felt good.

*All can arise but by cause
The pensive know, and they take pause
And see that if that source is gone
No thought, event, or act is born.
Create a God and you must find*

*Failure, for your faith is blind
But pierce the purple veil to view
All is dependant, never new.*

Whatever this meant, it felt profound to Lazuli and he copied it into his notebook. He rose and phoned several of his friends, who agreed to call the others and to meet at their favorite bar for a late lunch. It was there a couple of hours later that he found them already engaged in a political discussion about the unilateral decision-making style of the Sofist mayor being an affront to democracy. He half-listened for a while until one of their number addressed him directly.

“What do you think Lazuli?”

And his faraway answer seemed to suit the discussion though he was not at all involved in the subject at hand. He replied, “from such conditions, how could any different outcome occur?”

The political discussion continued to its usual fruitless conclusion before anyone asked about Lapis, which reminded Lazuli to respond. He glowed as he explained Lapis sleeping, eating and being content on the mountain, and the more he spoke, the more the others became uneasy. “It sounds like you want to join him in this folly”, one said. To which Lazuli heard himself reply, “I will indeed go again, and again and again, for it calls me to examine my life”.

A discordant discussion developed in which it was suggested that they all return to the mountain on the next

day. But it was clear that most felt they had explored it enough, they had already 'done that' and would move on to the next diversion – a new film at the cinema, a 4X4 rally, hang-gliding, a new mind-blowing drug were all mentioned. This was theirs and the usual way of erasing the uneasy feeling of suffering that still lingered unaddressed in each of their hearts. Thus it seemed that only a handful might meet on the morrow's morning at Liberty gate.

The handful was Lazuli and three others. They each took their chosen door and Lazuli took the Muni door again and made his way up Lapis' path. The other three indicated that they were making one last climb for Lazuli's sake to see if there was something in what he was saying. He had suggested they all take the Muni door but that did not appeal to the others, even though Lazuli reminded them it had not been his initial choice but was Lapis'.

"My first choice was 'friendship' " Lazuli reminded them, "but now it feels little different from the Muni way to me." In any case, the other three set off on their own paths after again agreeing to meet at Liberty gate at dusk.

Lazuli paused at the places he had previously passed, and as before found Lapis lolling on the lush landscape of the meadow.

"I have found what this place can teach me", Lapis exclaimed, and he prepared to explain. But Lazuli interrupted him to tell of his experience with the bookseller and the verses that had so captivated him in the book. "Its

called 'The Way of the Muni', whatever that means", Lazuli concluded breathlessly.

Lapis was silent for a long time. Eventually he whispered, "we are on the Way of the Muni." They looked at each other, each with a different comprehension and each with a certainty that something important was occurring. There was no need to rush into words, no need to speculate, no need to philosophize, no need for anything except acceptance of what they were both sure was natural reality.

It was Lapis who later broke the silence when he said matter of factly.

"The Way of the Muni is the name of this path that we have both climbed, at least partly climbed, but it is so much more. I am sure we will come to know what it is. You mentioned the lines from the book that had impressed you, and they speak of the very same thing that I too wished to relate to you. For this camp here has provided me with a perspective on life below. I look down and see that if certain things occur, then the other events I see later have been caused by that earlier event. I have realized that everything is caused by something, all is related to all. For me this camp will always be called 'Causal' for the link between cause and effect is now central to my understanding."

"But how is that related to the cryptic lines I recited to you", asked Lazuli, and even before Lapis replied, he felt the answer. If it was the same matter of causes and effects then causing the creation of a God must too have effects.

“Heretical I suppose”, observed Lazuli “but it feels right and I am now convinced that reason is only useful if it feels correct, if it feels true. I suppose it also means that our plans are but nonsense as it is other causes that determine the outcomes that we rebel against when we cannot control them”. At which Lapis laughed and said, “now I know what my Jewish grandfather meant when he said ‘If you want to make God laugh, make a plan’”.

Confused, Lazuli asked his friend “but how can a person think in terms of God yet not believe in God?”

And he heard the prophetic voice of Lapis once again.

“It is just a way of thinking, of conceiving something, and of communicating – just like talking of the sun rising when we know it is not the sun that rises at all but the that earth rotates. Real understanding is to see through the things we say and think we know but never question. This is what this mountain has shown me – so far. And I am sure there is much more to come.”

“What more could there be” Lazuli asked himself again aloud – “surely this is much already”. But his thoughts were interrupted by Lapis.

“I went up further again yesterday and I met another man on his way. In fact our ways crossed and we talked. So much that he said was the same as I had realized just in different words using different concepts. He said he entered a gate

called 'Awakening' and a door marked 'Logic' and that he had wandered in a dark place for months or even years before understanding that the way of logic needed to be complemented by something else. And he also recalled that he had once crossed paths with someone who said similar things but in terms of a God revealing knowledge to him."

"I feel it is all the same thing" concluded Lapis.

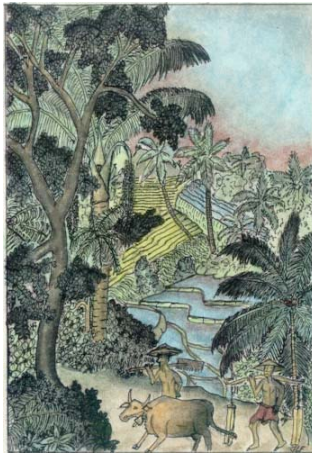
But Lazuli was unable to follow this and was concerned that he may be losing his sanity for while he felt it made sense, the established pathways of his brain would not allow the new thoughts to compute. And a rising anxiety made him suddenly want to return to the city.

Lapis was not his usual silent self as Lazuli departed. Drawing words from the ether he said, "you will return here, we have set our feet to the Way and it will control our feet and our hearts and minds. I will see you again and you will be content. Go in peace, and do not worry about the others who will no doubt have abandoned the mountain already."

So it was a sad Lazuli who descended the mountain to Liberty gate and who heard from his awaiting companions that, as much as they respected him and enjoyed the mountain, this was the final day for them. "Life has more to it", they said. "It is meant to be happiness".

Lazuli mused aloud, though almost to himself, "it is all about causes. There must be a cause to real and lasting contentment that is distinct from transitory happiness".

Yet they were deaf to his meaning. Lazuli resolved to read more of 'The Way of the Muni' and to return Lapis' Camp that he called 'Causal'.



Faith, Hope and Charity

“Causal Camp, that’s what Lapis had called it”, Lazuli heard himself say late the next morning as he lay in bed wondering why he had again slept late. And in the clarity of the morning he understood that Lapis had related an insight about life that was so obvious that he had previously glossed over it. In was an understanding that nullified so much that his life had been based on – planning and control.

“Yes, everything is the result of causes and if the cause for a certain thing doesn’t exist then that thing cannot come to be”, Lazuli exclaimed in Archimedean joy at his realization. Thus he too came to understand the poem in ‘The Way of the Muni’. And with that awareness, and with a rising excitement, he reached for the book and again began reading carefully.

Much of it made sense and Lazuli wondered why it was clearer now than the previous time. Then he read a chapter on the subject of conditioning and learned that conditions were simply another word for causes and he realized he had previously not had cause or the right conditioning, to understand these things. These were revelations and they seemed to have a physical effect on him. At once warming and cooling – but then Lazuli brought his emotion and reason together and realized that his exposure to the heat and cold of the mountain, the excitement and the physical stress of it all had predisposed him to whatever viruses were prevalent at the time. His alternating warmth and coolness

was in fact a rising fever. "So much for getting wrapped up in the mysteries of life!" he joked to himself, and noted that this was a far more natural response to such a situation than his usual anger at nature when illness forced him to slow down.

It turned out to be a virulent virus and Lazuli was only out of his bed for biological necessities for the next three days, and then for another three he was weak and did not venture from his house. His colleagues had not called, but he already knew they were less interested in him since he began to be so fascinated with the mountain. "How much less interesting must Lapis be", he reflected.

The fever had enfeebled him. It frustrated him for he wanted to visit the mountain again. He had only 'The Way of the Muni' as company and between bouts of delirium and exhausted fits of sleeping in which he saw his dead friend, he had read and reread the book until his dreams began to adopt its scenarios. It contained philosophical explanations as well as allegories, and the main story was a vaguely familiar one of a privileged young man who felt there was more to life than his everyday comfortable existence. On discovering the ubiquity of pain from the loss of loved ones, one's own faculties, and even over social inequities, the sensitive young man sought through the various approaches of his day to understand life. He eventually found 'the way of the Muni'.

Lazuli realized at last that 'Muni' simply meant 'sage' and that he was reading of an ancient Indian discovery known to

millions over the millennia. And this gave him more confidence and a strengthened resolve to re-climb the mountain as soon as he was able.

Once he was almost his old self again, he prepared to re-climb the mountain. He felt a need to contact his colleagues first. He went to their regular bar, but it turned out to be pointless – they were not interested in old adventures – they had done that, it was good for the exaggerated stories of young men but the actual experience was not worth repeating. Though there was one young man, Lacrymae by name, who seemed interested. But he was easily drawn back into the majority view after his sensitive questions – he was the only one to ask about Lazuli's recent sickness – attracted jibes of "boring" from the others. And being prone to tears and trauma, Lacrymae again faded into the background. Lazuli left them with the words, "for me it is important and I hoped you would understand that; no doubt some of us will talk of this more some day, but for now I go to the mountain".

He did not just carry, as he had other times, a small packed lunch and a bottle of water. This time he took sleeping gear and more provisions, as he intended to stay for many days. He had earlier informed his employer of his sickness of the past weeks, and now simply advised that he was now taking time off without pay to rest his spirit in a secluded environment. So it was with a light heart that Lazuli entered Liberty gate and passed through the Muni door and wound his way slowly up to Causal Camp where he rested alone, for Lapis was not there.

He decided to sleep the night there with the intention of proceeding further up the path the next morning, sure that he would find Lapis along the path somewhere. This was Lazuli's first night on the mountain and it was a special experience. Once the sun set, the laughter of birds that backdropped the day disappeared and a calm that he had never experienced in the city settled over the mountain, and over him. In such a peaceful embrace, he was soon asleep and did not notice the arrival of another who also entered the meadow, lay down and slept.

Lazuli was therefore surprised to see a fellow traveler lying at the other side of the small clearing when he awoke, and he wondered if Lapis had returned. But he soon saw it was a stranger. So he waited until his new companion stirred. When their eyes met they regarded each other with a calm acceptance that exuded mutual trust and shared understanding, though they did not yet know each other. So it was that their initial exchange quickly moved into shared experiences in a form of conversation that, Lazuli reflected, did not exist in the city – not even between friends let alone between two strangers.

"I have followed my own way to this place and I have only met four other strangers as well as two of my initial group that passed under the Gate of Eternal Life and who each chose their own door", his companion related. Lazuli told his own story including the fact of Lapis having stayed on the mountain now for some three weeks.

His new companion had met Lapis further up the mountain on a different path. "He is a real searcher and is progressively finding what he seeks", said the newcomer. Then he talked more of the others he had met on the path who had entered yet other gates and doors.

"I think it was the Gate of Self-Improvement or perhaps the Gate of Learning that the others had entered. One had entered the Door of Health which accorded with his idea that a sound physical regime produced a healthy mind and that the combination equaled a healthy spirit – but by the time I met him, he had learned that this was but a door and that a really open mind is much more than an endorphin-stimulated mind."

Another who had entered via a Door of Faith had started with a strong belief that had worked in her daily life, but as she progressed she saw that belief without thought was self-delusion and that the real meaning of faith was a confidence in a way learned from experience. "Oh, she was such a wonderful person to talk to", he reminisced, "and her smile told me that she had complete confidence in her path as she had walked it. I empathized with her more than any other on the mountain. If she had told me she could see the future, I would not have been surprised!"

"This mountain is more populated than I thought", commented Lazuli as he reflected how these stories felt true in terms of the changes that had been occurring in him. "And the others?" he asked.

“There were just two others”, was the reply. “One told me that his door had been Ethics as he had learned from experience that to consciously behave ethically caused him to develop this as a habit and that if everyone did the same it would be like a ‘habitat of social harmony’. He lived by the Golden Rule. But as for all of us, the mountain taught him more. He related to me that he had learned that to act ethically required a wisdom which could not be derived from the limited rational thought of the world alone but needed his full capacity. As we parted, he was preparing for a long period of solitary meditation.”

“And the other one?” asked Lazuli. “Ah, she was an inspiration, she had entered the Door of Physics, which sounded more like cosmology to me”. She had an idea that a unified theory of everything existed and could be developed by human conceptions and that this would somehow explain all things. Her transformation was wonderful as she was able to understand life without having to throw away her knowledge. I can still hear her description of her previous endeavors – ‘they were a large contribution to the smaller things of life’, she said. And her wide and deep classical education led her to recall that ‘the ancient Greeks may well have been more advanced than our society in this regard when they said that we humans were created for the amusement of the gods, for we certainly believe and do some pretty funny things’”. And he laughed at the recollection.

Lazuli reflected on what he had heard from his new friend. He also reflected on the relevance of part of each story to his own development over the past weeks. He now even saw his

week in bed with the virus as a result of conditions – conditions of the virus, of his exhausted physical state from successive late nights and strenuous walking when he was not used to it, of his weakened mental state as he oscillated between the habits of the city and the attraction of the mountain. And he also saw the same force – this central force of everything, conditionality – at work on him in the mountain environment itself.

As these musings settled down and after Lazuli had added more of his own story, he realized that he had not yet heard his companion's personal tale. So he asked for it, as if this was just natural – and having asked, he again recalled how much easier it was to be open with people, to trust them not to hurt you, to accept them as part of yourself.

"Well!" his companion began. "I am afraid you will find my story more mundane for it comes from a conventional approach to life in the world below." Lazuli replied that he thought his own story was exactly that – a conventional life in the world below. To which the reply was, "Yes, good point, perhaps we all think our own lifestyles and viewpoints are conventional." And after a pause he continued with his story.

"Three of us set off up the mountain. In fact there were many more who began the journey from the church that we attended. You see it was the church that I meant formed the conventional part of life. Anyway, three of us set off seriously – through the 'Gate of Eternal Life' and the doors of 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity', which each suited our own

dispositions. I, like the young woman I described earlier, had strong beliefs – now I have none save what I have tested in my own experience, and that is why I stay here for the time being so that I can understand more of myself and of life. My friend who followed Hope is still on the mountain but he has a difficult time of it for he will not see beyond a belief-based hope in some future life and event – but I can see he is gradually realizing that we can also understand scriptures as allegories and that hope really means an expectation of seeing more of reality.”

“The third of our number entered the Door of Charity, for she is a naturally generous soul. I see her often, high up on the mountain where she has seen things that I have not. As soon as she passed through the door, she said she felt that she could see that her nature had got her that far but from then on she must open her mind, and she did. Her most recent words to me were of generosity being nothing unless it came from wisdom and compassion and that while we may see this as an expression of love, this is often a simplistic view from our narrow world-bound minds. She is indeed an angel if such beings exist!”

Lazuli’s heart was warm. His stomach was full for they had shared food as they talked – Lazuli’s pre-prepared food and his companion’s harvest of herbs and legume seeds from along the way. And it was now mid-afternoon. Lazuli recalled that he must hurry if he was to go further up the path, but somehow he also knew that there was no need to rush.

And so, as his companion bid him adieu, Lazuli settled into a reflective mood and a great calm overtook him. After an hour or so, he decided to try the awareness practice mentioned in 'The Way of the Muni'. And two hours later he found himself so calm and aware that he knew Lapis was on his way to the meadow. Lazuli rose from his meditation and gazed around the clearing with a calm mind. And without questioning his intuition, he prepared a rude meal for the two of them.



The Evangelist

It must have been two hours later that Lapis entered the clearing and, on seeing food for two remarked, "So, you have begun to listen to your intuition – it is a wise councilor isn't it?"

To which Lazuli could only reply with surprise, "I don't know about that, but I felt sure you would be here soon and just acted on what felt right."

And so ensued a deeper conversation between the friends in which Lazuli learned of the great developments in Lapis' understanding of himself and life – until they each lay down to sleep.

The next day began softly with a gentle sun awakening the two pilgrims soon after dawn. They rose, abluted and shared the remainders from the previous evening's dinner before setting off up the path.

"I have been along here several times now", said Lapis as he set an easy pace for them both, "and each time it has an effect on me. I wonder if it will be the same when I walk with another?"

They walked on for some hours at their leisurely pace and eventually sat down at a little stream under the shade of an old tree whose roots and moss meshed into inviting natural chairs.

“I call it ‘The Tree of Transition’ for it is here that I realized what had eluded me all my life”, Lapis quietly admitted after a silence for a period of time.

Lazuli nodded and then, as if as an afterthought to some other action, replied, “I think I know what you mean for I have felt my heart grow lighter as we walked and without knowing why, I have a feeling of contentment. And it somehow relates to what I was reading while sick last week – everything is the result of conditions of the past, even the inevitable bad things that I may not want to have happen. And knowing this, I am somehow liberated from the effects of those bad things. They are just the facts of life.”

Silence was again sovereign of the two. It was as if they communicated without need of words for this was a shared experience that they did not need to justify, explain or examine. As they prepared to continue their path up the mountain, Lazuli marveled at the ease of the path if taken at a natural pace, and he eventually commented as much to Lapis, who in reply opened a wider conversation.

“I have met many others who are on their different ways up the mountain, all at their own speed, and some have said how hard and steep it is. It seems to me that it is indeed hard for some if they see it as a challenge or if they are striving for a specific goal. And it is especially hard for those wanting to keep hold of an idea or some thing from the past. But if it is approached as a way, a path, it is not difficult once it is begun and in fact it seems to pull to one along and is full of

welcome surprises. My own eyes have been opened by these people that I have met and this has complemented my own experiences in the meditation and reflection that I practice along my own way.”

“There was one man I met whose approach showed me that although conditions determine all things, the conditions are not always evident at first glance – this man called himself ‘The Evangelist’ though he seemed to have forgotten the good news component of that word. He said ‘the loving God will care for you if you follow his commandments’, and I replied ‘If?’ ‘If?’ ‘Surely that is not entirely good news if He is able to withhold His love!’ His view conflicted with my naïve thought that conditioning from the mountain itself made one understand things more deeply. I thought that opening oneself to new experiences and places made one more open-minded and tolerant. But the Evangelist so berated me and all others with his own simple, literalistic and naïve views that I had to admit that whatever new experience and places he had met with, they did not broaden his mind, they had simply allowed him to spread his narrow-mindedness over a broader area.”

Lazuli laughed at this irreverence and observed, “I suppose the loving God idea is meant as a description of the way all is seen as integrated and hence loving when we see wisely, which is so far from the fundamentalism of your evangelist”.

Lazuli then went even further and mused that perhaps these are stages for each person and he then related an old story he

recalled from his darker Spanish forebears about the prophet Moses. He thought it was a Sufi story.

“Moses had just reproached a simple shepherd for praising God too intimately by offering to groom God’s hair, to wash the dirt from God’s coat, and to nestle his head in his God’s woolly trusses. Immediately upon doing so, Moses was reproached by God who said ‘that was as close as the shepherd could come to me for he expresses love as for a lamb, and you have driven him away. All men differ and each can only accept what they can understand at the stage of their particular way’.”

“How true!” remarked Lapis as he marveled at the similarity of allusions and allegories used by different people and cultures at different times. And he was moved to tell Lazuli of all the characters he had met on his wanderings of the past weeks, or was it months for time now seemed to him to be an irrelevancy. He told of learned lads, of wise women, of grace-filled girls, of mystical men, and of what they had experienced and of their advice. Lazuli was a sponge to this spiritual wine and as he listened, he walked his path with ever lighter feet and heart.

First Lapis recounted a story of two wayfarers on different paths, who upon meeting each other felt they had a common understanding. But their joy turned progressively to anxiety as they delved deeper into their beliefs. One held that Lovelock’s theory of Gaia was a fact, and that we could detect the earth as a living thing and that this extended to all components of the universe. The other claimed the Greek

classics told of ancient and still powerful gods. He gave me some lines from Homer to show how Gaia was a goddess behind that life of the Earth. Let me read them to you.

*“Gaia, mother of all I sing, oldest of the gods.
Firm of foundation, who feeds all creatures living on earth.
As many as move on the radiant land and swim in the sea,
And fly through the air – all these does she feed with her bounty.
Mistress, from you come our fine children and bountiful harvest:
yours is the power to give mortals life and to take it away.”*

“But the interesting thing”, explained Lapis, “was that each had a clearer view of the other’s error than they did of their own. The Gaia believer pointed out that Homer was simply using the language and imagery of his day, while the follower of the Greek gods explained that the modern Gaia theory was simply a means of correcting the narrow conceptions of science encouraged since the Renaissance. Yet each would not hear the other and they parted on their different ways in disagreement.” I hope they have since learned more of themselves.

“Another I met was a philosopher who spoke so much of Schrödinger – much was difficult for him as it is for others that I have met who focus on one person or philosophy in general. The philosophy had been both an entry point into himself and a barrier,” recounted Lapis. “I wrote down his words as far as I could recall them, for they tell of our relationship with nature, which I have come to know is a means of touching the divine within myself. But even that is

no more the divine than any icon. Let me read these words to you also.”

“You are as firmly established and as invulnerable as nature herself, indeed a thousand times firmer and more invulnerable. As surely as she will engulf you tomorrow, so surely will she bring you forth anew to a new striving and suffering. And not merely ‘some day’: now, today, every day she is bringing you forth, not once but thousands upon thousands of times, just as every day she engulfs you a thousand times over. For eternally and always there is only now, one and the same now; the present is the only thing that has no end.”

Lazuli thought on this as they meandered through the forests and steep little valleys as they climbed higher and higher. And as they walked, the trees thinned out and the air became cooler and the sunlight more direct. Lapis slowed his pace.

Lazuli asked, “Is there another meadow on which to camp tonight?” And he was startled to hear Lapis reply, “we are near the summit. If you look about, soon you will see other paths and people, all like us – content, open and quiet. Look there are the Gaia and Homer followers – it looks as if they too have found that the essence of their approaches is the same!”

“We will rest here tonight so that we may make the remaining hour’s walk as the sun rises.”

Lazuli gazed about over the next half-hour. Indeed there were perhaps two dozen other persons in similar positions to them – scattered around just below the summit. Men and women, young and old, dark and light skinned, dressed in many different ways. Lazuli saw that the area in which they had arrived was quite broad and that all these persons could comfortably camp without disturbing each other.

They settled down to eat simply of the berries and beans they had collected as they walked, shared the remaining drop of wine that Lazuli had brought from below and bid each other a fond good night and were asleep while it was yet twilight.



The View from the Summit

First to sleep, Lazuli was also awake long before dawn. Was it excitement? He didn't feel any particular anticipation. Was it his intuition again telling him something would occur? He was beginning to trust his intuition. It had been right before when Lapis had arrived to share the dinner that he had intuitively prepared for two. Or was it just that he had gone to sleep early the previous evening? He decided that this was the most logical reason and reflected how easily one drifted to exotic explanation when, as the medieval monk William of Ockham had notably observed, 'the simplest explanation is usually true'.

He lay there recounting the events of the past month to himself and gradually saw that, while another observer might see major changes, the conditioning for these changes had been occurring long before that. And they had been catalyzed by his reaction to his friend's death. These were the conditions that attracted him to the mountain, that enticed him to read 'The Way of the Muni', that bonded him to Lapis in their journeys. And now, soon, they would together make the short final climb to the summit.

As Lazuli lay there reflecting on his life, he understood it better. A wave of something, perhaps pity perhaps compassion, passed over him. He was concerned for his erstwhile colleagues who had started on the mountain path and had abandoned it – he pitied their ignorance. He wanted to help them. He wanted to return to them and tell them

what he had learned. But then he compassionately recalled their last parting when they clearly did not want to learn about such things. And he found himself remembering Lapis' story about The Evangelist, who in spending his time trying to convince others of his gram of truth, distracted himself from gaining the tons of real Truth. And he recalled the wise Taoist saying, 'he who knows not, speaks; he who knows speaks not'.

With such serial revelations, Lazuli felt a rising joy. And it was in such a state that the waking Lapis found him when he stirred in perfect time for the short pre-dawn climb. They rose, freshened up and shared some water and leftover rice, and turned to face the summit.

What a glorious sight it was! The pre-dawn light silhouetting the peak as purple against deep blue, the scant trees and the other persons scattered about the circumference similarly standing and silently sighing at the same sight. Lapis and Lazuli began walking in silence together up one of the many ways that now opened to them and found that theirs' and the ways of others merged into one. And so it continued until they reached the summit where all the paths converged – and a wonderful vista was laid out below, lit by the rising sun.

It was as if the sun was a switch that activated life in the city as well as highlighting the actions of people below. It was as if they could see into the very intentions of people in the city – see where pretence shielded intent. And it was clear that underlying intentions determined the success of elective

actions. And they could see that what was commonly referred to as 'good intentions' were never enough, for they were often based on ignorance. Even though full conscious thought might be applied to an action, unconscious conditions of the past or motivations shrouded by delusion meant that outcomes, even if apparently successful, were accompanied by unexpected and undesired effects. But balancing this, they could also see that sincere intentions, even if flawed, encouraged a person's development as they gradually related more to their deep conscience, such as when they practiced complete honesty of speech with compassion.

They saw so much. It was another revelation, not by specific divine presence as some at earlier stages of the way had suggested, but a personal revelation. And each of those who had climbed their own path to this peak of understanding knew in their own minds that they had been climbing this mountain long before they ever set foot on it. They saw and grokked – understood fully, intuitively – that everything was related to everything else, and that therefore, nothing and no-one was foreign or a stranger.

All knew this in their own manner according to their prior conditioning which they now saw was portrayed in paths they had paced from their personal gate, be it Secular or Sufi, Mystic or Muni, Judah or Jesu, Prophet or Poetry. Lapis' collection of stories and sayings that he had collected over the years and into which he had been dipping each night and morning, contained something he had read from Whitehead about the fundamental error of Western philosophy being its

assumption of independent existence. And he understood, yes grokked, that “every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way in which it is interwoven with the rest of the universe”. And his mind went a step further and related this to Einstein’s message also jotted in his little book “that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion” and our continual striving to overcome this delusion “is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security”. This was what the climb had been he now knew – it had been an opening of his mind to reality, the antithesis of the unexamined life laid out before them below.

But how did they see such intimate things? Lapis knew the answer. Lazuli too. They did not need to speak. They just looked at each other and saw that the other had the same inner security, in words they had known from another strange little book published a decade earlier about two great sages of two millennia ago:

*... simply perceived as all the same,
until investigated,
then they differ, so look again,
see all things integrated.*

With a revelatory glow they sat in silence among the other wayfarers who had shared the experience. Each had started with some opening that suited their life and disposition, and now they knew that all paths are true on the right mountain. As they sat, they realized that even though it seemed so, this was not some lightening bolt of insight, but was the culmination of a slow dawning, a realization that had been

preparing itself in the night of their worldly lives. And it was not a realization that produced ecstasy in the manner of novels, but a warm, confident feeling that produced great contentment. Contentment in the knowledge that the functioning interrelationships between all things defined life, including the harsh interruptions to these relationships that humans inflicted in their ignorance.

They could, at this point, simply stay here atop the mountain and let the ignorance of the world be a teacher to others, as it had been for them.

And together Lapis and Lazuli spontaneously recited the lines from Yeats' poem, which now seemed to describe them perfectly.

*"There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare,
One asks for mournful melodies:
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay."*

They felt gay, they understood the tragic scene of the ignorant life, and they heard the harmony of the heavens in their mellowed minds. But rather than just enjoying the view from the summit, they also knew that the fully realized life could be lived anywhere. So they chose, as did most of the others who shared the experience, to return to their former worlds. But each now knew their lives had changed forever.

Re-entering the World

As they descended the mountain together, Lapis and Lazuli spoke with each other in an ever easier manner. They laughed at what was funny, accepted the inevitable that had previously troubled their lives, and as they walked they lived – just lived. They talked of consciousness, which they now saw as both the human nemesis and the key to all human dilemmas beyond survival.

And Lapis again referred to his little notebook where he knew that he had Einstein's description of this being an "optical delusion of consciousness, a kind of prison restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us". And he agreed with the subsequent conclusion that our duty was – "to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its reality". It all sounded remarkably like words of Schweitzer, the Gospels, 'The Way of the Muni', and various other scriptures and philosophical works.

And so it went on. The sages of history had said it all. The two pilgrims considered metaphor after metaphor and realized that this too had been done. Books had been written of personal revelations, tracts of experiences, eclectic little stories of cities and mountains – but who reads them? And of those who read them, who really internalizes the message. Yes, they agreed, it was 'message' in the singular, for all

these writings, from diverse sects, orders and worldviews, were saying the same thing.

This same message was one of utmost simplicity. It did not require giving up rationality; it did not require blind belief. In fact, it welcomed the testing of revelations in one's own experience. The message was that every event, action, thought and outcome arises from conditions such as other events, actions, thoughts and outcomes – nothing is independent of anything or anyone else for all things exist in a state of continuous interrelated flux. And so in reality, no separate 'self' exists – "Yes, that is indeed the crux" they silently communicated, "self is perhaps the deepest of our delusions".

"I think I know now how my mind works" Lazuli slowly and quietly revealed to Lapis.

"It is as if it sorts the events of my life into a script and writes a story to join them into a continuity. An event that changes something in my life like a rejection to a job application becomes rewritten as my choice to do something different. Or even less sinister, my memory links actions and events as if I planned them when in fact I made no conscious association at the time. But what does seem sinister is that this story of me that my mind invents becomes me, and I have clung to that story, that image for as long as I can remember. Now I see it as fiction and my reliance on it as a delusional clinging that has led me to fight against the natural order of things, reality."

“Couldn’t have said it better myself”, replied Lapis, and they continued in silence until they set camp for the night, for it was still a half-day’s walk to the gate and the unreal world that knew itself as the ‘real’ world.

The ‘real’ world arrived faster than they imagined in the form of their erstwhile colleague of that first day’s tentative exploration of the mountain, Lacrymae. They greeted him warmly but to little effect as he appeared to be deeply upset. They learned between his sobs that he had been walking aimlessly for days in these lower reaches of the mountain, seeking something that he seemed unable to define. He was troubled, but was somewhat relieved to find some familiar faces. But then he said he would just like to sit by himself.

After a small meal, which Lacrymae declined to share, Lapis and Lazuli talked for a while before retiring. They talked of the gate they had entered – Liberty, and of the other gates that they had seen and heard of, with such wonderful names as Art, Asceticism, Awakening, Bahai, Charity, Competition, Deeds, Democracy, Eckhart, Equality, Faith, Grief, Health, Hope, Ishtar, Jesu, Judah, Kenosis, Learning, Liberty, Marx, Muni, Mystic, Natural Understanding, Occultism, Philosophy, Poetry, Prayer, Progress, Prophecy, Quelle, Reflection, Science, Secularism, Security, Self Improvement, Sufi, Trauma, Utopia, Vedas, Work, Xunzi, Yearnings and Zoroaster. What a collection of names, and these were but a sample of what they had heard about.

“But do you recall that I actually started through a different door to you”, said Lazuli. “It was only when I went back to

look for you that I followed your path through the Muni door. I wonder how my path would have been if I had stuck to my first choice?"

Lapis looked at him and asked, "and what was that door you first chose?"

Lazuli replied quietly for he already knew what it meant.

"Friendship", he said. And they both knew that in following after Lapis through the Muni door, Lazuli had been following the path of friendship. And Lazuli recalled some words from 'The Way of the Muni' - "nothing assists the Way like friendship".

Their attention was drawn to Lacrymae as he came over as if to join the conversation, for he had been listening at a distance. His sadness had become contained and he appeared more open to communication. He began to speak.

"I have been listening to you talk about the gates and doors. We all entered the gate of Liberty but only you two seem to have found liberty. We each chose our own doors, but the rest of us gave up after the novelty wore off. And now I have returned only because of the difficulties in my life that overwhelm me."

"And which door did you chose then and now?" asked Lapis.

“That’s just it, you see”, said Lacrymae. “I entered the door of Trauma the first time. Why I chose it I didn’t know. And when I came back this time, I automatically went through the same door. And in listening to you talk, I now realize that the door that brings me here in fact describes my life which is just one trauma after another. On top of all these now my great love has left me” And he dissolved in tears again.

It was Lazuli who rekindled the conversation after a sensitive period of silence.

“You have passed this far and you will progress further, for we now know that all the ways are one and that the very things that make us sad are the things we cling to most firmly. When you make your climb, you too will understand the blessing of your trauma. You will recall that we originally met each other seeking consolation for diverse events of suffering in each of our lives”

Lacrymae wanted to believe this. In fact he found the quiet confidence of these two friends reassuring. But he could not understand and in his confusion, went off to try to sleep.

Lapis and Lazuli also retired, Lazuli speaking for both of them when he observed, “you know, only a month or so ago, I would have engaged in unconstructive pity with our friend in his dilemma, but now it is clear to me that our most compassionate action is to respect his sorrow by speaking the truth and encouraging him in his way. I feel his sadness and see its cause, but only he can release himself from it. At best,

we can only support and guide him toward seeing more clearly.”

The next day, all three rose early, enjoyed a hot tea and some biscuits. Lacrymae bid farewell, still unclear where he was wandering, and the other two continued their way down the mountain. After the usual hour or so in silence, they inevitably fell to discussing Lacrymae’s debilitating disappointment in love.

It was Lazuli who crystallized the question. He said “Isn’t it an irony that love, the very means of describing the vision of understanding, is also the cause of such pain. Why is it that love is so misunderstood? And besides, if someone enters a gate, don’t they automatically progress to understanding, for that seems to be what happened to us?”

But Lapis had been pondering these very questions and had a clear answer.

“Your second question is easy, for I have met many others on my way and learned much about the manner in which different people approach the mountain. I recall one story of a young man who entered by a door called ‘Art’ but never progressed far from the door itself, preferring to return to his outside attachments and to condemn that door as ‘the wrong art door’. He would then travel around the base of the mountain until he found another gate and pass through another door related to Art, such as Drawing, Dance, Design or Drama. In his pursuit he experienced moments of warmth

but he soon cooled because he would not continue on any path. I hope our friend Lacrymae is not in this state.”

“But what about love? asked Lazuli again.

And Lapis with the certainty of a real teacher expostulated. “We can understand this simply as metaphor being mistaken for message. Love is the most powerful of our constructive emotions and so is the best metaphor for conveying an understanding of reality. Recall that the scriptures we have read use a mother’s love for her child to symbolize spiritual love, but what is called love today is debased romantic attachment and lust mistaken as special and elevated beyond its station. As I see it, and I must say it is very clear to me now, the metaphor refers to seeing how we are one with all things – that is why we depict love as mother and child, not just for the emotional bond but to show the very relatedness of flesh and blood. And just as it is silly to do anything that harms part of our own flesh, so how can we consciously harm anything if all is related. Even in the mistaken romantic metaphors, no true lover does anything to harm his love. On top of this, there is the use of love in its different forms such as brotherly love, dependent love, contingent love and balanced romantic love to illustrate the path leading from the door of such ordinary love to spiritual love. A developmental path if you like.”

They were in accord. They enjoyed this newfound means of communicating about reality and of dispensing with the complexities of the attachment-based views and lifestyles they had previously lived. They were returning to the ‘real’

world where they might no longer fit into routine employment and social norms, but they were unconcerned. So, as they neared the foot of the mountain, they slowed their pace, and savoured the experience. On coming to the Muni door, without overt communication, they jointly laid a makeshift garland of the surrounding herbs which they placed at the portal as a recognition to themselves of what had occurred in their minds, in their lives.

They passed through Liberty gate and reflected that they were indeed liberated from the shackles that bound them when they began their journeys and they knew that even though they had returned to the city, they were still on their respective Ways, as they knew they would be forever.



Epilogue

Years later, Lazuli ran into Lapis on the main street of Sofist City. Each was pleased to again see the other as they had seldom met across these years. After their experiences on the mountain, they had shared many discussions and dinners for a few months until Lapis advised that he was moving to the other side of the city to live with a group of others who had climbed the mountain. Lazuli had stayed in his old neighborhood worked part-time teaching reflective concentration and philosophy, although most other things in his life had changed.

“So how is a decade of communal life?” asked Lazuli. To which Lapis replied, “Oh, I left the group a few years ago to pursue my writing and personal reflection, and to live more conventionally. They were a wonderful group, but there is a natural tendency to conform when living together, which while it felt right for me for the first years, eventually became less constructive to my further development. As a great teacher once advised, one should be ‘in, not of, the world’. So, I moved back to this side of town and have been helping at the Mountain Books shop for the few dollars that are essential.”

“It’s a wonder that we have not run into each other before, for my own part-time work in the fair trade enterprise is in that same quarter,” observed Lazuli. “Tell me what you have learned, my old friend”.

Lapis smiled. "I am sure it is the same for you. Each day is the same and wonderful. The unnecessary things of life are patently so and this leaves more time than anyone in this city needs for ensuring their sustenance and comfort."

They talked of matters of common interest, listened each to the other's activities, and at times enjoyed silences. By now they had moved to an outdoor café in a quiet alley, away from the trendy and loud crowd with their sound-leaking electronic devices.

"I saw Lacrymae last year", said Lapis – "he continued on the mountain for a few years and eventually reached the summit. He is a changed man, still nervous for that is his physical and psychological conditioning, but he has a clear understanding of life and reality that guides him now. It was such a joy to see him like that."

"Ah, if only more could see reality, the utopian dreams that fuel this omnipresent advertising would be real, though in markedly different ways! But tell me about Mountain Books, for it was such an important part of my way," continued Lazuli.

"Well" began Lapis, "it is far from a commercial business as you must have already guessed. In fact the old man whom you met has long died – he died so well as if it was just a part of life. Now others like him help out at the shop. It really exists by selling a few out of print books on spirituality when commercial booksellers cannot find them elsewhere. Otherwise, it caters to searchers, like you when you knocked

so tentatively a decade ago. So, mainly I read and reflect when it is my turn to man the shop. In fact just yesterday I came across one snippet that may interest you – it concerns the name of the city.”

“Lazuli replied, “perhaps I know it, or something of it, already. Isn’t the State name – Rugh Epit – a tribal name for the mountain meaning something like Sacred Site?”

“That’s part of it” replied Lapis, “but there is more, and its very revealing.”

“Indeed the indigenes’ name does mean something like that, probably with more of an emphasis on gnosis – something like ‘Holy Mount of Wisdom’. And when the town was formed by Europeans, they named it ‘Sophia’, meaning wisdom, as a sign of respect for that tradition. I find it quite amusing that today’s name, ‘Sofist’ is commonly interpreted to mean something about sophistication, when its official designation is with the State’s initials attached after it.”

“Curious and droll” observed Lazuli with a laugh, “but how did sophia become sophistry, its opposite?”

Lapis replied, “it seems that the name was changed officially in the boom years of the 1860s, when a group of recently rich citizens assumed high office and wanted to call it something like ‘sophisticat’ to showcase to the world their newfound cool sophistication. Wise council objected and a compromise was the truncated sophist with an ‘f’ in place of the ‘ph’, which the trendies saw as modern literalizing of

‘sophistication’. The elders agreed provided the States initials were appended with the minutes noting that this was agreed ‘to assist the understanding of whomever may follow’. In making the full name sound like the sophistry it was, and is still today, one more sign to whoever ‘has eyes to see’ was left for us by the wise. But it is not really different from any other city, I suppose.”

They both laughed for they knew they were describing themselves up until ten years ago. “I laugh at so many things as I observe our strange actions caused by attachment,” said Lapis, and Lazuli agreed. “I recall reaching for the top as we were all encouraged to do – ‘climb your own mountain’ we were told – but it always meant towards some goal, ambition, position or fame. I am sure that we and those others on other paths climbed the right mountain.

“People sometimes ask me what is the purpose of life, and I offer answers that I feel will wake them up – sometimes I give long descriptions, other times I just say something like ‘be a human being, not a human doing’, and sometimes I even quote Vonnegut’s answer that the purpose of life is ‘to fart around’. And many come back to ask more questions.

“While I did not know you well in your previous life, your journey from bored overworked and suffering office worker to wise man seems as natural and as beautiful as anything I can think of right now,” Lapis replied with a smile and added in the same tone of deep sincerity, “And I know you are right from my own experience. A person can only wake up to reality when he is ready, so it is often suffering but

sometimes just a word, a description, or a change in lifestyle that effects the conditions suitable for openness to reality. We are two fortunate men to have found these things while we were young."

And intimate communication continued in the silence that claimed them until they parted an hour or so later, and it continues though they are miles apart and seldom meet, in the city, yet ever on the mountain.